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Sacrifice of Ishmael

so desires give her my shirt, perhaps it may comfort her a little.' Abraham said, 'My son, you help me to do what God hath commanded me to perform'. 173 539

"Then Abraham did as his son requested, and after he had bound him he bent down and kissed him, weeping all the time. Ishmael his son also wept till the tears ran down his cheeks.

"Then Abraham put the knife to his son's throat, but it did not cut.

"It has been said that God had put a sleeve of brass round his son's throat.

"Then Ishmael said: 'O my father, turn me on my face, for when you see my eyes you are sorry for me, and pity takes hold of you and keeps you from doing that God has commanded you to do'.

"So his father did this, but when he put the knife to the back of the neck, it turned over, and a voice called to him, 'Faithfully done, O Abraham, thou art my servant indeed'.

"Then Abraham turned round and found a ram entangled by its horns in a nearby bush, so he sacrificed it in place of his son Ishmael.

"And it came to pass that after sojourning awhile with his son Ishmael and his wife who had joined him, Abraham returned to his own country, but Ishmael remained in the land of his adoption."

The above story appears to have been taken from a very old book known as *Qisds al Anbiyd* or Stories of the Prophets, written centuries ago, though I have no reference book which gives its date. Suffice it to say that the writer wrote many tales regarding events of the Old Testament, and almost all the knowledge the Badawin of Arabia has of ancient Biblical history comes from this book. 173 538

It has been said that educated Muslims do not pay much attention to the *Qisds al Anbiyd*, though I do not like to think this is the case.

It is interesting to learn from this book that among early Muslims there was a difference of opinion as to whom Abraham was going to offer up. The Qur'an does not definitely give the name. Some persons of prominence thought it was Isaac and not Ishmael, while others even held that it was Joseph. The tradition that for a long time, and until the Ka'bah was burned in the days of Hajjaj, there hung on its walls a *pair of ram's horns*, made the author of the *Qisds al Anbiyd* decide that it must have been Ishmael.

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desert country, full of tribes which recognized the authority of no government. Without the assistance of this old man, it might be impossible to proceed. Even so, I felt that I could with dignity wait no longer, and I signalled to my two companions. We rose, walked out of the tent to our camels, and began to adjust the saddles and prepare to mount. But a slave ran out to us and, pulling Ibn Hadhdhal's man by the sleeve, he led him back to the tent. Apparently he persuaded the shaikh that we were harmless, for we were invited back, and Al Nuri himself so far unbent as to say, "You are welcome! We are always glad to see the English!" This appeared to use up his available conversation, and he soon afterwards disappeared. We spent the rest of the day strolling about, talking to the slaves and tribesmen, or sitting amongst bales of cloth and tobacco in the tiny tent of an itinerant merchant from the Iraq desert oasis of Kubaisa.

Al Nuri was a tremendous personality who maintained despotic control over his tribe. His authority was notorious, and the Ruwallah were frequently laughed at by other tribes for their tame submission to such autocracy. One such story related how a man of the tribe, summoned in the tomb by the recording angels to give an account of his actions on earth, replied, "I am only a dead Ruweili, and all claims are settled by Ibn Shaalan." But although a redoubtable champion in action (he had murdered his elder brother in order to make himself shaikh of the tribe), he did not, like most Arabs, possess the gift of conversation.

The authority which Ibn Shaalan wielded over the Ruwallah was probably unique amongst bedouins, and was due to personal fear of this formidable old man. The Arab tribesman will accord theoretical and verbal respect to the old families of chiefs, but he will rarely accord them obedience in practice. He constantly opposes and argues against his shaikh. Not infrequently he loses his temper, creates a violent scene and hastens to strike his tent and move away to join the following of some other chief who will treat him with more consideration. Amongst bedouins freedom always tended to degenerate into anarchy—but free they were—freer perhaps than any other race in the world.

In happy England we have come, for centuries past, to identify our personal liberties with the political independence of our

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After the first shyness had disappeared, conversation became free and general. The growing danger from the Ikhwan was anxiously debated—a raiding party had recently been seen at the well of Garagir, only a few miles south of Kaf. It was at this same well that Khalid ibn al Waleed had watered 1,300 years before, during the first Muslim invasion of Syria. Then, to forget the fears and anxieties of the day-to-day world, the one-stringed violin was brought out, and with a fresh round of tea began the poetry and music. In Central Arabia there is a story to every poem, and before reciting the ballad itself, the story should be told. One of the best stories told that night was the tale of Ibn Hadi's daughter.

Two of the most powerful tribes of Central Arabia are Ateiba and Qahtan, whose shaikhs, Ibn Humaid and Ibn Hadi, used in the old days to be perpetually at war. Once upon a time the then Ibn Hadi had a beautiful daughter, who resolutely refused to marry any of the numerous suitors who presented themselves for her hand. Ibn Humaid, head of the rival tribe, was a young man and a famous raider, and had carried plunder and devastation through the camps and flocks of Qahtan. His prowess was the talk of every camp and fireside in Nejd. In Ibn Hadi's tent many long and anxious debates were held to discuss how to resist the daring assaults of Ibn Humaid and Ateiba, and the Qahtan shaikhs swore to sacrifice a camel each as a thank-offering if their relentless enemy should ever fall into their hands. One day, yet another suitor presented himself at the tent of Ibn Hadi to solicit the hand of his daughter, and her father came to consult her. But she rejected the proposal contemptuously, and swore that she would never marry at all, unless her suitor were a bedouin shaikh, who was at the same time the most gallant in war, the most generous, the most handsome and the most witty of the Arabs. The suitor retired discomfited.

But a Sulubbi, a tinker of Arabia, a member of that menial tribe the members of which pass from camp to camp unmolested even in war-time, had overheard the conversation. "Ya amaimati! (My little Aunt)," he whined, "there is only one man who answers the description you have given, and that is Ibn Humaid." "Oh, if only I could once see him," said the daughter of Ibn Hadi.

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0538 The tinker wandered off, and days and weeks passed, until one day he came to a camp of the tribe of Ateiba and told the story, which was repeated by the tribesmen to Ibn Humaid. That night the shaikh slipped away from the camp unnoticed, and riding alone for several days across the desert, came in sight of the grazing flocks and the distant black tents of Qahtan. He lay concealed till the evening, and, after dark, slipped into the camp with his drawn sword in his hand. Reaching the shaikh's great tent, he crawled to where the daughter of Ibn Hadi was sleeping alone in a curtained compartment. Waking her quietly, he announced who he was, and they remained talking in whispers until the dawn appeared. Then the girl implored him to go, saying that he was courting death: but he refused. Soon the appearance of broad daylight made escape impossible.

In bedouin camps the chief makes coffee early in the morning, and the men of the tribe collect in his tent to drink it and discuss the topics of the day. Only a curtain, hung across the centre of the tent, divides them from the women. Soon the tribesmen began to collect in Ibn Hadi's tent, until all the leaders were present, talking and drinking coffee, and divided only by a curtain from their bitterest blood enemy, Ibn Humaid.

Then the girl nerved herself for the supreme crisis. Carefully steadying her voice, she stood up and, looking over the curtain dividing the tent, said: "O Father, I ask you to grant me a request." "It is granted before you ask it," said the shaikh, with whom she was a favourite child. Turning to the assembled chiefs of the tribe, she said: "O Qahtan! You are witnesses of my father's promise." Then addressing her father again, she asked him to spare the life of Ibn Humaid. The old man replied that such a request was ridiculous and told her not to be foolish. This was not women's work, and, in any case, Ibn Humaid was two hundred miles away in the tents of the biggest tribe in Arabia. When they had caught him, they could decide what to do with his life. "He is this moment in your tent," said she. The shaikh jumped to his feet, snatched his sword and glared round at his companions. Everybody was on his feet, crying out at once. But the fearless girl was not a raider's daughter for nothing. "O Qahtan!" she cried, "you are witnesses to my father's oath!"

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The old men intervened and said that it was true. They were witnesses that her request had been granted whatever it might be. Ibn Humaid was received as an honoured guest, and the men of Qahtan who had sworn to sacrifice their camels if Ibn Humaid fell into their hands slaughtered them for the marriage feast.

The narrator's voice was silent. The hall was in darkness except for the glow of the embers on the hearth. It was past midnight. We rolled ourselves in our sheepskin cloaks, the shaikh's retainers produced pillows and quilts, and in a few minutes we were asleep.

Only when we were saddling up next morning did we discover that Qasim ash Shemam had made off in the night with my saddle. Our hosts professed themselves deeply ashamed and indignant at this treachery, and the invaluable Salih ibn Uthman produced another saddle, on which I rode in some discomfort for the rest of the journey. There remained only 120 miles to Amman. We left the Ruwallah country at Kaf, and, saying farewell to our kind friends, set out for the country of the Beni Sakhr tribe of Trans-Jordan.

The wind had dropped, the sky was cloudless, the air soft and warm, and range upon range of blue desert hills stretched before and behind us. Three hours' riding brought us to the tent of a shaikh of the Beni Sakhr. Our reception was non-committal, the shaikh, it appeared, being away. We had not been seated long before an old car rattled up, and two Arabs descended from it and entered the tent. Everybody rose, and hastily spread carpets and cushions and welcomed the visitors, who were obviously people of importance. By way of making conversation, I enquired what news there was. One of the visitors replied that as an Englishman I obviously knew more of world events than they. I answered that this was not so in my case at least, for I had spent a month on a camel in the desert, whereas he had just arrived by car from Amman. "Oh, in that case," replied the shaikh, "I will tell you. We hear that the English have broken their promises again, as usual."

Such was my first reception by the tribes of Trans-Jordan, with whom I was later on to become so intimate.

further than this, for none of them wishes to get a reputation for being a quarrelsome or trying companion, and so, when there is anything to do, they all jump up and offer to do it, whether it is to look for a camel, gather wood, or make coffee. Their life is ruled by conventions, and public opinion sees to it that these conventions are observed. In the desert there is no privacy. Every action is seen, and you might say every word is overheard, for they always live crowded together for safety; in any case, they are the most observant people in the world, and everything that happens, however trivial, is noted and later repeated and discussed, so that something which a man has said or done on the coast of the Persian Gulf will be spoken of months later, hundreds of miles away on the borders of the Yaman.

Another difference between Badu and villagers is the way they treat their animals. No Badui would ever knock his camel about; it is far too precious, and in any case he is much too deeply attached to it. You will often see him fondling and kissing his camel, and he will generally be hunting round for titbits for it. Badui, indeed, will always sacrifice their own comfort to that of their animals. Some years ago, when we arrived in the Hadhramaut out of the desert, I remember the enormous meals which were provided for us, such as my always hungry companions cannot even have dreamed of; yet next day they were frantic to get back to the desert where there would be proper grazing for their animals. Sometimes, looking at a wonderful view, I have said to a Badui, "Isn't that lovely?" and he has looked round for a bit and answered, "No, it is rotten bad grazing," and he saw nothing else, whereas if he had been a Persian he would have rhapsodized over it.

Yet they are passionately fond of poetry. They are a noisy, talkative race. I think many of them would find it as hard to stop talking as a heavy smoker to stop smoking, but they will sit for hours in silence if someone is reciting poetry. They are also deeply religious, and in their hard lives they derive at all times a profound comfort from their faith. Townsmen often scoff at them and say that they are little better than pagans because they do not observe all the ritual of Islam and are sometimes lax over their prayers and fasting, but you cannot be with them without realizing what an integral part of their everyday lives their religion is. A Rashdi once described to me how alone he had crossed the trackless wastes of the Eastern sands for 450 waterless miles. Astounded that anyone should have ventured on such a journey unaccompanied, I asked him, "Do you really mean that you were by yourself?" and he answered me quite simply, "God was my companion."

The Badu are the product of their environment, and it is the constant struggle for survival which has fashioned them as they are. Security is unknown to them and their rewards are at all times pitifully small. At any moment drought, disease, or raiders may sweep their herds away. Yet, tempered from childhood by wind and sun, they face life unflinchingly. In this harsh and barren land the desert lad mates only with the desert maid, for who else would share the Badu's couch among the wind-blown sand? For centuries they have guarded the purity of their blood with the dagger, and they are fine-drawn, highly strung, and unstable as thoroughbreds.